

VZCZCXRO2579  
RR RUEHBC RUEHDA RUEHDBU RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHDIR RUEHGI RUEHJS RUEHKUK  
RUEHLH RUEHPW RUEHROV  
DE RUEHJI #0078/01 0562012  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 252012Z FEB 09  
FM AMCONSUL JEDDAH  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1205  
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE  
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000078

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [ECON](#) [KWMN](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SA](#)  
SUBJECT: SAG REPORTEDLY ELIMINATING BARRIERS FOR SAUDI  
BUSINESSWOMEN

REF: JEDDAH 538

11. (SBU) Summary. The SAG has reportedly decided to eliminate restrictions on Saudi women which prevent them from entering into a number of commercial fields or from running businesses under their own names. The move, which was communicated in writing to the Businesswomen's Center at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI) by the Ministry of Commerce, was disclosed by the Center's CEO, Basmah Omair, during her address to the American Businessmen of Jeddah (ABJ) at a breakfast meeting on February 22. Local press also reported the story, quoting Omair and others from the JCCI. Details remain sketchy pending official release of the revisions to applicable law, but the Ministry's action marks a major success for Omair and the KBKC's lobbying campaign over the past two years. End Summary.

12. (SBU) The Khadijah Bint Khuwailid Center (KBKC) at the JCCI has rapidly evolved over the past five years from a training center for business women to a professional lobbying organization that has taken on the challenge of identifying barriers to women's full participation in the economy and eliminating them. By enlightening the relevant government institutions and proposing realistic solutions that are sufficiently non-threatening as to be achievable, Omair's work has started to bear fruit. From the fundamental to the trivial, the KBKC has uncovered the inequities in basic commercial laws and regulations and succeeded in many cases in eliminating them - - at least on paper. Their objective is to create a level playing field. Whether women in Jeddah or elsewhere in the Kingdom are ready to play is another question, and they acknowledge that change on the ground will likely trail behind the removal of impediments. By taking this approach and not attempting to force change on those in society who would prefer to maintain the status quo, they have been able to head off a certain amount of opposition to their efforts. Not every campaign has met with success, but they are learning how to work the system and advancing most of their goals.

13. (SBU) The developments emerging this week were reportedly decided six weeks ago. For now the specifics are being kept quiet until the KBKC can clarify the scope and geographic reach of the new regulations. Whether these new rules affect only Jeddah or extend to the rest of the Kingdom remains to be seen, though Omair says that the JCCI is working to ensure Kingdom-wide applicability before they announce anything. What is known is that women will for the first time be able to obtain a license to do business in any field open to men including construction, real estate, and services (Reftel). According to Omair, women will also be able to sit on corporate boards and run enterprises, though the need for a male figurehead to hold at least a limited Power of Attorney (POA) for certain commercial or legal processes may still be required. The JCCI continues to fight the POA requirement

since many women are unwilling to risk investing in a business /where a man, solely by dint of the mandatory POA, has the effective right to strip a company's assets, sell the enterprise, or simply run it into the ground.

¶4. (SBU) Omair noted that the Ministry's action is the result of two years of active lobbying by the KBKC. Unquestionably much of the credit goes to Omair herself who brings a uniquely American style to her work. Raised in Washington, D.C., where her father was a Saudi diplomat, and educated at American University, Dr. Omair understands how to devise and implement a targeted lobbying effort. She focuses her exceptional speaking skills and powers of logical persuasion on her audience, leaving anyone within hearing range convinced of her arguments. Basmah Omair is a woman to watch should merit-based democracy take hold in the KSA during her lifetime. In the meantime, she appears ready -- based on a small aside during her talk -- to apply her skills to the holy grail of women's equality: driving.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: The first woman ever to address the ABJ, Omair was also the first speaker to receive a standing ovation following her fast-paced powerpoint-assisted presentation. Omair's invitation to speak at the ABJ came at the urging of Pol/EconOff in her capacity as a member of the ABJ Executive Committee. The event was the first to attract a sizeable female audience to the group which in recent years has seen its ranks dwindle as American businesses have left the Kingdom or moved to Riyadh. Pol/EconOff continues to lobby for reform of the ABJ to make it more open to business women, starting with the revision of its name from the American Businessmen in Jeddah to the American Business Group in Jeddah -- a change which is under discussion and may take

JEDDAH 00000078 002 OF 002

place later in 2009. By networking the expat business community together with Saudi women business leaders, Post can support the efforts of the KBKC to open doors for business women in Jeddah thereby contributing to the transformation of this society. END COMMENT.  
QUINN